

Gov. Inslee hopes for ‘epiphany’ on education funding

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SEATTLE — After meeting with President Barack Obama on Friday, Washington Gov. Jay Inslee said he is even more focused on increasing opportunities for working Americans.

Inslee said in a conference call from Washington, D.C., that he and the president agree: Education is one of the best ways to accomplish that.

Raising the minimum wage and building a clean energy economy were two other focuses at a White House meeting with a group of Democratic governors, the governor said.

The governor said he hasn't given up on the Legislature putting more money into education this year, even though there are only three weeks left in the session. He criticized some lawmakers in the Senate for wanting to do absolutely nothing on the education budget this year, calling that just kicking the can down the road until next year.

"We're hoping some of our Republican colleagues have an epiphany," Inslee said.

The Washington Supreme Court has told the Legislature it must make meaningful progress toward meeting the requirements of its 2012 McCleary decision, which said the state is not meeting its constitutional duty to amply pay the cost of basic education and that the state depends too much on local dollars.

"We have a number of legislators who think zero is a good answer," the governor said. "You can run but you cannot hide from this McCleary decision."

State Sen. Andy Hill, the chairman of the Senate Ways & Means Committee, has said Republicans are just as committed to providing amply for the education of Washington children as Democrats. But the Republican from Redmond notes there are different ways to reach the goals of the McCleary decision and the process takes time.

Inslee also talked about the president's push for post-high school education and training for students who aren't going to college, and he previewed a meeting he has scheduled with U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan on Sunday.

The governor is hoping to resolve a stalemate between federal officials and the state Legislature over the state's teacher and principal evaluation system.

The federal government has said Washington must require school districts to use student scores on statewide tests as a factor in teacher evaluations. The current law does not mandate it.

Washington state has a waiver from provisions of the so-called No Child Left Behind law. It could lose the waiver and some federal money by not changing the current law. No other states have been given a pass on this issue.

Inslee said he was going to press the state's case with Duncan, but may still need the Legislature to take action. Earlier this week, the state Senate defeated a bill that would have made the required change in the evaluation law.

On the minimum wage, Inslee said he and the president also agree on the connection between economic growth and a higher minimum wage.

Inslee said he would like to see the state and the nation ramp up the minimum wage to make up for lost ground over the past decade. The economy will grow and the need for public assistance will decrease if the minimum wage goes up, he said.

The president, supported by some of Washington's Congressional delegation, is pushing for a federal minimum wage of \$10.10. Washington state has a minimum wage of \$9.32.

Inslee said he also supports Seattle and other community's independent efforts to take their own path on the minimum wage. Seattle officials are discussing an increase to \$15 an hour.